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Speeches Honoring Abraham Lincoln

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LINCOLN STATES
HIS FAITH

Sermon by Irving R. Murray

Sunday, February 12, 1950

First Unitarian Church
Ellsworth and Morewood Avenues
Pittsburgh 13, Pennsylvania



On a Sunday morning, exactly one hundred and forty-one years ago, in a log cabin (dirt floor, a solitary open window and a single door swung on leather hinges), Nancy Hanks gave birth to a male child, assisted by her husband, Tom Lincoln, and a granny woman. Mother and baby lay under warm bearskins on a bed of poles cleated to a corner of the cabin. Tom was heaping more wood on the fire when Nancy said she wanted to name the boy Abraham, after his grandfather. So Abraham Lincoln was welcomed February 12, 1809 into a world, says Carl Sandburg, "of battle and blood, of whispering dreams and wistful dust".

The Lincolns lived hard by nature. When they moved to Pigeon Creek, Indiana, they had no animals, no house, nothing but the land under their feet and the winter sky overhead. First they built a half-faced camp, in which they lived for a year. Rain and snow were uninvited but persistent guests; sometimes the wind joined the fire-smoke to force them out. Meanwhile Tom Lincoln chopped logs for a cabin, and Abe, seven years old, helped as best he could in trimming the branches. Water was a two-mile walk. Food was game shot in the woods nearby. School was nine miles --- and back. When the cabin was finished they lived in it eighteen years --- all but Nancy Hanks. Lincoln was only nine when she died. Tom whipsawed logs and planed them into planks, while little Abe whittled pinewood pegs to hold his mother's coffin together.

But nature was not all austerity. Sandburg suggests its many colors in his poem of the ax, the pioneer's indispensable tool, which the boy Lincoln began to learn to use when he was eight.

"Except in spring plowing-time and the fall fodder-pulling he was handling the ax all the time. The insides of his hands took on callus thick as leather. He cleared openings in the timber, cut logs and puncheons, split firewood, built pig-pens. He learned how to measure with his eye the half-circle swing of the ax so as to nick out the deepest possible chip from off a tree-trunk. The trick of swaying his body easily on the hips so as to throw the heaviest possible weight into the blow of the ax --- he learned that. On winter mornings he wiped the frost from the ax-handle, sniffed sparkles of air into his lungs, and beat a steady cleaving of blows into a big tree --- till it fell --- and he sat on the main log and ate his dinner of corn bread and fried salt pork --- and joked with the gray squirrels that frisked and peeped at him from high forks of near-by walnut trees. . . . He could guess close to the time of the year, to the week of the month, by the way the leaves and branches of trees looked. He sniffed the seasons. Often he worked alone in the timbers, all day long with only the sound of his own ax, or his own voice speaking to himself, or the crackling and swaying of branches in the wind, and the cries and whirs of animals, of brown and silver-gray squirrels, of partridges, hawks, crows, turkeys, sparrows, and . . . occasional wildcats. . . . So he grew, to become hard, tough, wiry. . . . It was the wilderness loneliness he became acquainted with, solved, filtered through body, eye, and brain, held communion within his ears, in the temples of his forehead, in the works of his beating heart. He lived with trees, with the bush wet with shining raindrops, with the burning bush of autumn, with the lone wild duck riding a north wind and crying down a line north to south, the faces of open sky and weather, the ax which is an individual one-man instrument, these he had for companions, books, friends, talkers, chums of his endless changing soliloquies."

We shall not understand Lincoln's faith unless we reckon with the man who cleared land to open it for cultivation, helped build houses, made flat-boats --- on one of which he travelled the length of the Ohio and the Mississippi; the Lincoln

who made furniture, ox-yokes, wagons and wagon-wheels; who split rails to earn a pair of trousers, four hundred rails for each yard of the cloth. And it is not easy for us in Pittsburgh, A.D. 1950, to understand this Lincoln. "Nature, as man has always known it, he knows no more," Susanne K. Langer has written. "His parks are 'landscaped', and fitted into his world of pavements and walls; his pleasure resorts are 'developments' in which a wild field looks unformed, unreal; even his animals (dogs and cats are all he knows as creatures, horses are parts of milk-wagons) are fantastic 'breeds' made by his tampering. No wonder, then, that he thinks of human power as the highest power. . . ." Abraham Lincoln, we shall shortly see, did not think of human power as the highest power. We shall be less tempted to write off his theistic thought as superstition if we recall that he lived hard by nature. With our outlook on the world we find it hard to understand any save a realistic, literalistic vision. Can we understand Lincoln? Can we make our way back to that great mind that grew up in a half-faced camp? Those of us who live in apartments in this man-made city, apartments which can't collapse, let in rain or blow away --- and in case of a leak, the fault is with the pipe or the people upstairs, not with heaven --- can we bridge the gap between our literalistic, positivistic mentality and the seething, color-filled, imaginative mind of A. Lincoln? Let us try!

Lincoln's faith was no stereotyped, conventional product of ecclesiastical tradition. He believed in God, not because he had been told to or taught to, but because by his lights he had to. There was no element of superstition or wishful thinking or special pleading in his belief. This faith was founded upon the bedrock of experience and sober thought and hope, yes, that also, but hope disciplined by mature self-criticism, by common sense, by practicality, by salty wit and earthly wisdom.

The Emancipator believed, first of all, in man. And yet you will search his writings in vain for the simple, unequivocal affirmation, I believe in man. Lincoln's humanism was devoid of sentimentality; there was in it none of that Pollyanna optimism, that wholly unrealistic and immature bravura that was, let us confess it, somewhat characteristic of our liberalism early in the twentieth century. The Gettysburg Address is a typical affirmation of the mature, disciplined but nonetheless resolute humanism of the great President. You know the lines. Notably absent from them is the strident, un-convincing "we-men-of-earth-have-here-the-stuff-of-Paradise" note, the brash, adolescent trumpeting of our invincibility that forgets how very much we men of earth have here of the stuff of Hell. Lincoln did not forget the polarity of our virtue, our strength, and our error, our weakness. This is Lincoln's humanism: faith in our unfinished work, the task remaining before us, increased devotion, a new birth of freedom --- and faith that we, and our children, and our children's children shall, indeed, be dedicated to the unfinished work, the great task forever being accomplished and forever remaining before us. Lincoln's humanism is a faith that there shall be a new birth of freedom, every day! It is a confidence in the deepening devotion of his fellow-citizens maturing and enduring throughout all generations. This faith is a summons as much as a promise; but then it is also a promise as much as a summons.

The paradoxical complexity and simplicity of Lincoln's faith is revealed in his political sagacity. The famous but far from well-known, well-understood Emancipation Proclamation may be cited by way of example. The New York Herald complained the day after the Proclamation was issued, "While (it) leaves slavery untouched where his (Lincoln's) decree can be enforced, he emancipates slaves where his decree cannot be enforced. Friends of human rights will be at a loss to

understand this discrimination." The New York Herald was both right and wrong. Yes, though few of us remember it, the Emancipation Proclamation gave freedom to the slaves in the rebel states only. In the Union states the institution was left untouched. Utopian friends of human rights were, indeed, at a loss to understand this characteristic act of a President wiser than they in the ways of human nature and of human progress. Lincoln himself explained the action to a Border State Governor and Senator: "I am naturally antislavery. If slavery is not wrong, then nothing is wrong. I cannot remember when I did not so think and feel, and yet I have never understood that the presidency conferred upon me an unrestricted right to act officially upon this judgment and feeling." Yes, the Emancipator proclaimed freedom to the slaves where he had no power, and he did this because he understood it was the most effective move he could make toward freedom for all slaves on the North American Continent. He knew that a proclamation of freedom to slaves behind the Union lines would be contested in the courts and probably judged unconstitutional. But since in the South slaves were listed as property, and since under the rules of war he had as Commander-in-Chief power to dispose of an enemy state's property, the Emancipation Proclamation, as issued, was perfectly legal and proper. And Lincoln understood that having thus overcome the constitutional hurdle his Proclamation would stand, in the minds not only of posterity but of even the greater part of his contemporaries, as an effective announcement of the end of slavery throughout America. The President foresaw what Henry Adams witnessed in London, witnessed and wrote, "The Emancipation Proclamation has done more for us here (England) than all our former victories and all our diplomacy. It is creating an almost convulsive reaction in our favor all over this country." Continental Europe reacted in the same way. History judges that Lincoln freed the slaves. Technically he did nothing of the kind. In fact he did. Mature political wisdom, that is what one sees, on analysis, in the Emancipation Proclamation. And behind that wisdom, supporting it, informing it, nerving and sustaining it, a disciplined faith in man, a faith cognizant of the evil in men --- taking forethought, precautions against that, and a faith confident of the strong, persistent goodness in men --- relying upon that, rather than upon any authority, for the ultimate turn of events.

"In no one of the thirty-one rooms of the White House was Lincoln at home," Sandburg declares. "Back and forth in this house strode phantoms --- red platoons of boys vanished into the war --- thin white-spoken ghosts of women who would never again hold those boys in their arms --- they made a soft moaning the imagination could hear in the dark night and the gray dawn. To think incessantly of blood and steel, steel and blood, the argument without end by the mouths of brass cannon, of a mystic cause carried aloft and sung on dripping and crimson bayonet points --- to think so and thus across nights and months folding up into years, was a wearing and a grinding that brought questions."

Where was Lincoln to find the answers to these questions? In constitutional law? Lincoln concluded not; he reasoned with himself: "Was it possible to lose the nation and yet preserve the Constitution? By general law, life and limb must be protected, yet often a limb must be amputated to save a life; but a life is never wisely given to save a limb." So he came to see that "measures otherwise unconstitutional might become lawful" rather than that he should "permit the wreck of government, country, and Constitution all together."

But if the President and Commander-in-Chief could not find the answers to his

questions in constitutional law, where then? In the traditional texts of revealed religion? Lincoln revered the Scriptures, but he did not feel bound by them. In conversation with a Congregational minister and army chaplain, the Reverend J. P. Thompson, Lincoln said, concerning the ancient Hebrew attitude toward slavery, "I have sometimes thought that Moses didn't quite understand the Lord along there."

Revealed religion, then, is no more conclusive, no more final than constitutional law, in suggesting answers to the problems of the national leader caught up in the cruel dilemmas of civil war, the human individual confronted by the complexities, the paradoxes of history.

There can be no doubt that Lincoln believed the individual must discover and articulate his own answers. We cannot rely upon the founding fathers, of either the state or the church, to have done our thinking for us. "The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we (not the ancients, but we ourselves) must rise with the occasion. As our cause is new, so we must think anew and act anew."

And yet we should be humble in maintaining whatever position we suppose we must. Again and again Lincoln in the White House returns to this view of the necessity of individual judgment, by reason, but with humility. This is, in fact, the essential purport of his faith in God.

So he wrote, for himself alone, in September, 1861: "The will of God prevails. In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both may be, and one must be, wrong. God cannot be for and against the same thing at the same time. In the present civil war it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party; and yet the human instrumentalities, working just as they do, are the best adaptation to effect his purpose."

Again and again the President pondered this theme. To the Quaker Eliza Gurney he wrote in 1864: "The purposes of the Almighty are perfect, and must prevail, though we erring mortals may fail to accurately perceive them in advance Meanwhile we must work earnestly in the best lights he gives us, trusting that so working conduces to the great end he ordains."

The finest expression of this faith is given, of course, in the Second Inaugural Address: "Neither party expected for the war the magnitude or the duration which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the cause of the conflict might cease with, or even before, the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding. Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes his aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces; but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered --- that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has his own purposes. . . . With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in. . . ."

These words are of course reminiscent of Micah's, "What doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with the Lord, thy God?"

The Second Inaugural is in the tradition of Hebrew prophecy; and for simple eloquence, for moral and spiritual grandeur, for true humility it has no equal in American literature.

When Lincoln said God, he meant, then, a superhuman mode and power of truth and righteousness. He did not think of God as an excuse for our laziness or error. God was not an escape but a goad. Yet there is comfort and strength in this God, this goad, not the illusory comfort of anaesthesia, but the true comfort and peace of invincible faith in the fabric of meaning. This is God as the keystone of the arch of meaning. Meaning is perceived, to the degree that we perceive it, by human reason. But to believe in God is to believe there is meaning even where reason is as yet powerless to perceive it. Not necessarily, be it noted, to believe that everything, every last event in time and space, has meaning in any ultimate sense. No, we do not have to press credence so far to believe in God. Theism maintains, in the last analysis, only that meaning is real and persistent even where --- not necessarily everywhere, but somewhere --- (even where) reason is as yet powerless to perceive it; and God is thought to be the power of meaning's persistence, the ground of meaning's reality. This, I suggest, is a valid, contemporary interpretation of what God meant to Abraham Lincoln.

Recall, please, the point with which we began: Lincoln lived hard by nature. Nature's poetry intimated to the rail-splitter meanings beyond reason's then-established power to penetrate. And I sometimes think that we who work and live and play in urban, industrialized, altogether man-made, landscaped developments, have become hair-splitters about God because, unlike the rail-splitter, we do not see in nature a warning to be humble in the exercise of private judgment, whereas the meaning of all is undoubtedly somewhat different from the meaning any one of us is able to perceive.

At the White House reception the night of the Second Inaugural the President shook hands with thousands of well-wishers.

But now he straightens his tall form, and looks far down the line. He breaks away from the official party, strides down the hall to greet a young Army Lieutenant, who is having a difficult time with his crutches. "God bless you, my boy!" --- the President says to him. The Lieutenant looks deep into the wonderful lighting of those beneficent grey eyes. Later, happy, exulting the Lieutenant will say to a friend, "Oh! I'd lose another leg for a man like that!"

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